

**House Foreign Affairs Committee  
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission**

**Briefing  
on  
Enforced Disappearances in Bangladesh**

**August 31, 2021 - 10:00 a.m.  
Virtual Event**

**Statement of Shahidul Alam  
Photographer, writer and social activist**

I was picked up from where I am right now, on August 5th 2018. It was deep in the night. I was handcuffed, blindfolded, dragged away. There was no mention of why I was being taken, where I was being taken. My laptop, my mobile devices were also taken away. The building's security cameras were taped up. The hard-disk taken away. I had no opportunity to talk to my lawyer. It was only because I kicked and screamed and resisted that my family and friends, who were nearby, were able to know I was being taken away.

Only gangsters do this. Is this the way the state is meant to behave?

Though they had direct involvement, the police denied any knowledge of the incident. They refused to record the complaint letter, which we call the GD or general diary, which the court has decreed that they must do. My family was not informed of my whereabouts.

It was only because my family was able to find out independently where I was being tortured, that they surrounded the place and kept an all night vigil. Their presence and the international exposure I received is probably why I am alive today. The judge, in court, told my family “consider yourself lucky he wasn’t disappeared”.

I bring this up, because the reason many people are disappeared as Meenakshi Ganguly from Human Rights Watch says, is because they are dissenters, opposition activists, people who try and exercise their freedom of expression. This is a constitutional right, but those exercising it get arrested under the digital security act, are cross-fired, or disappeared.

August 30th was the International Day of the Victims of Enforced Disappearances. The families were present, yesterday, in a protest organised by Mayer Daak (The call of the Mothers). It was at the National Press Club. I was there.

The government's primary accountability is to its people. The government has written a letter to the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission in response to this virtual briefing — which is fine. Why, however, are they not responding to these families? It was a widely advertised event. There

were mothers, sisters, and children, crying their hearts out because they wanted their loved ones back. These are ordinary people who feel they have been wronged, reaching out to their government for help. People from all walks of life were there. Why was the government not there listening? Giving them answers. If they really had nothing to do with the disappearances, they should have responded to the needs of their citizens. Being with them at their time of need.

Why is not a single case being investigated? The government's letter talks of impersonation. There were scores of witnesses, eyewitnesses at the meeting, who talked of RAB in uniform with RAB vehicles coming to pick up the victims. What credibility does the government have if impersonators can operate so blatantly. They come in an armed convoy, in vehicles with official markings, full of uniformed people and pick someone up? If today someone can impersonate RAB so easily, tomorrow they will impersonate the government. What confidence can a people have in a government that allows this to happen?

A police force, that has the ability to pick up a juvenile in a remote village for sharing a Facebook post, is clueless when an armed uniformed convoy picks up someone from his home. You really expect us to believe that? And if that were true there should have been a countrywide manhunt for the imposters. Instead, we have denials. The Bangladesh government letter to Lantos Commission is yet another denial. The idea is that if you repeat a lie often enough, people will believe it. Except that the families bear witness. The families who were there all knew. An entire nation bears witness. Had the government been what they claim to be, they would have had the guts to hold a fair election. They would have faced the public. They would have responded to the complaints with genuine concern.

Appeasing the international community with meaningless pledges while ignoring the pleas of its own people, cannot be the response of a legitimate government.

But then, do we have a legitimate government is the question.